

Blue Raiders make it seven in a row with victory over Louisiana

MT remains undefeated in Sun Belt play at 4-0

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Four Blue Raiders scored double figures, paced by Raymond Cintron's 17, as the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team extended its winning streak to seven games with a 65-53 victory over Louisiana on Saturday evening at Murphy Center. MT halted the Ragin' Cajuns 12-game regular season winning streak in Sun Belt action while making it five straight wins over Louisiana. The Blue Raiders remain atop the East Division, improving to 4-0 in SBC play and 15-2 overall, and are one of two undefeated teams in the league, along with UALR at 3-0. The seven-game winning streak matches the longest in head coach Kermit Davis' tenure and the seven straight home wins also tie a single-season record under Davis. Cintron finished the contest a perfect 12-for-12 from the free throw line as the



Blue Raiders went 28-for-37 from the stripe. Marcos Knight added his 14th double-digit performance of the season with 16 points to go along with nine rebounds, two assists and two steals. LaRon Dendy added 13 points and eight boards, while JT Sulton tallied 10 points, two steals and two blocks. MT held the Ragin' Cajuns (8-9, 2-1 SBC) leading-scorer J.J. Thomas to just five points, all coming in the final seven minutes. Josh Brown paced Louisiana with 17 points and seven rebounds, while Kadeem Coleby scored 10 points. After going more than three minutes without a field goal to open the game, the Cajuns went on a 7-2 run over the next 1:43 for the early advantage. The Blue Raiders answered with a 12-0 spurt, sparked by Knight's short jumper off the backboard. Dendy brought the Blue Raiders back with four straight points, knocking down a pair of free throws then

spinning off a defender for a floater to put MT back on top, 8-7, with 14:23 to go in the first half. The basket also gave MT the lead for the remainder of the contest, although the Cajuns managed to tie the game two more times. Shawn Jones also capitalized on pair of free throws and Cintron drove in for a jumper to cap the run and give MT a 14-7 advantage. Louisiana battled back with a 9-2 run to tie the game at 16 with just under nine minutes remaining in the frame, as Elfrid Payton and Brown combined for all nine points during the stretch. MT scored its next six points on free throws, sandwiched around a layup from Louisiana's Darnell Jackson, to go up 22-18. Dendy and Brown traded layups to finish the half with MT leading 25-22. Cintron scored the Blue Raiders' first five points and nine of the first 11 to open the second stanza and give MT a 10-point lead. Cintron hit six free throws during the stretch, including two after a technical foul was called on Louisiana's bench. The Cajuns quickly rallied with a 7-0 spurt to cut the deficit back to three with 16:00 to go, but Sulton's three-point play put the Blue Raiders back up, 39-33. Knight and Dendy added to MT's lead with back-to-back buckets for another 10-point lead, before Brown's triple made it a seven-point game. The two teams continued the back-and-forth contest, with MT maintaining at least a six-point advantage, until the 6:56 mark when Thomas scored his first points of the game on a pair of free throws then added his first basket of the game to make it a one-point game with 6:04 to play. Coming out of an MT timeout, the Blue Raiders responded with a pair of crucial baskets. Dendy laid one in and Knight converted a three-point play to stretch MT's lead back to six with less than five minutes remaining. Knight made it seven consecutive points after two more free throws and a layup to put MT up, 59-50, with 2:57 left. Knight continued his solid second half with a layup at the 1:32 mark that gave the Blue Raiders their largest lead of the game at 63-51. MT finished the contest on an 11-5 run and limited the Cajuns to one field goal in the final 6:03 to seal the victory. MT looks to remain undefeated in league play when it hits the road for a two-game swing next week, traveling to FIU and Florida Atlantic. The Blue Raiders will face the Panthers on Thursday at 6:30 p.m. CT and round out the trip against the Owls on Saturday at 6 p.m. CT. **Postgame Quotes**

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS: Defending and rebounding is something we are doing really, really well. We are very physical, and we played another really physical team tonight. Lafayette guarded us really well. We are struggling a little offensively. We've got to get back to finding our rhythm. We shot 37% and still won the game. I thought that was about as well as we'd defended for 40 minutes.

(On hitting 8-of-9 free throws when it became 49-48): That's a trait that this team has had all season except for a close game here with Belmont. But free throw shooting is getting better. We got to the line more. We tried to emphasize to Raymond about driving the ball more, and he did. During that stretch, it seemed like we made four or five free throws to get it back up to ten, and then like good teams do, they made a great run at us, and I thought we responded.

(On 15 wins in early January): That's quick, that's quick for any team in college basketball. It is against a challenging schedule. There is a lot of basketball ahead of us, we feel good about where we are, and we have a lot of areas that we can improve in every day. But 15-2 and 4-0, that's pretty special.

(In the early conference race, does 4-0 mean something?): It does. We have played three home games, and now we have to get on the road. We are plus-1 on the road, but we have a big weekend ahead of us in Florida, but half of it is protecting your home court, and 4-0 is a great start.

(On individual performances): I thought Marcos Knight gave us a big lift in the second half, he made some great drives and finishes at the rim, Jimmy Oden responded and played very well when Bruce Massey went out. We have got to get back to where we have more assists to baskets made,

the ball going side to side more. It stuck on one side, and we dribbled the ball way too much tonight.

MARCOS KNIGHT: Every game you are not going to be able to shoot the ball well, sometimes you have to grunt it out and find ways to win, and we did tonight. We need to move the ball more side-to-side, there were too many one-on-one plays tonight, but we'll get back to it and the team will work hard every day.

The key to our success is defending and rebounding, and staying together as a team. Every night, there is going to be a different player scoring in double figures, but we don't care about that. We just care about winning. That's all that matters to us.

RAYMOND CINTRON: We'll take (15-2). We've been working hard for that. There's no doubt about that. We'll keep working hard every day, and win as many as we can. We'll go out there and try to do our best.

(What is it about this team that allows you to finish well?): At halftime, coach told us that we weren't playing like we had been early in the season, so when the game was on the line, we just executed and stayed together, and that's how we are successful.

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